

Engaging the media



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Barbara Starr, Pentagon correspondent for CNN, interviews GEN David Petraeus, commander United States Central Command, at Kabul International Airport, Dec. 15, 2009. (Photo by PO2 Christopher Hall, U.S. Navy)

As Thomas Jefferson once said, “All that tyranny needs to gain a foothold is for people of good conscience to remain silent.” Never have these words been truer than in today’s world. With embedded media and news organizations on every corner, you have to live under a rock or way off the grid to avoid the media. The media, whether it is print, radio or television, is going to be out in the mix of events including training exercises, combat deployments, ceremonies and even funerals. The question we have to ask at this point is, why avoid them? Why not go out and tell the field artillery story, the air defense artillery story or the Army’s story? We, as servicemembers, families and civilians, must be aware and more importantly prepared for the media to tell a positive story. The first thing to remember is they are not the enemy.

THE MEDIA CAN BE A VERY SUCCESSFUL TOOL TO EDUCATE, PROMOTE AND CELEBRATE THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF OUR ARMED FORCES. As a former servicemember, I observed many Soldiers unsure of the media and even their own public affairs representatives. The chain of command at every level should be proactive in engaging a media strategy and bolstering the confidence of their Soldiers to build a strong and stable relationship with their public affairs officer and the civilian

press, both U.S. and local nationals. You, as a servicemember, are the subject matter expert for your field. If you do not tell the story, someone else will do it for you.

This asset is changing in a way that is shaping the world today. During World War I and World War II, it would take weeks if not months for a letter to get home to the families. Now, in today’s information age, I could text a friend who is in Kuwait, Iraq or Afghanistan and they could have a message back to me on Facebook 30 seconds later. This tool has increasingly become more powerful and influential, but as a wise comic book writer once wrote, “With great power comes great responsibility.”

The power to tell the Army’s story has never been easier and with a little responsibility we can shine a positive light on the good work each of the branches is doing. Remembering what you say or what you do not say can save your buddy’s life. With the number of media outlets and the accessibility we have to those outlets both at home and abroad, it is every Soldier’s and family member’s job to enforce information security. **USING COMMON SENSE AND DISCRETION ARE THE CORE POINTS TO ALL PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND SOCIAL MEDIA REGULATIONS AND MEDIA ON THE BATTLEFIELD TRAINING.** Things that

may be happening in your area of operations can have international implications. Documenting exact troop numbers and strengths, and tactics, techniques and procedures are all good examples of sensitive information that needs to be protected. Of course, a Soldier should never lie about anything, but any question outside of their 'comfort zone' or their realm of responsibility should be fielded through a public affairs representative or their chain of command. Everyone is responsible for operational security.

Another piece to the media-Soldier puzzle is training. **GETTING THE RIGHT TRAINING AND PREPARING FOR THE MEDIA IS JUST AS IMPORTANT AS DOING PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE ON YOUR WEAPON.** They are tools to fight in the international conflicts we support and as such should be handled carefully but with confidence. "Unfortunately, unrealistic portrayals of media on the battlefield reinforce bad habits and perceptions of journalists on the battlefield. When the platoon finally deploys, it encounters embedded local and international media on the battlefield. And the world reads, watches and listens as opportunities to tell the Soldiers' stories are lost," said LTC Randy A. Martin, public affairs officer observer/controller, Joint Readiness Training Center operations group. "With a little preparation, creativity, planning and resources, training centers can create an information environment that promotes effective media on the battlefield training."

And of course when in doubt, research and educate yourself on the policies, procedures and regulations. There are no firm policies which directly refer to the use of the major social networking sites

such as Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, etc; however Army Regulation 360-1 can assist with many media-related questions. As regulation currently stands, it is important for Soldiers as well as public affairs professionals to remember the two guiding documents that apply to all public communication: operations security and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. As those regulations are written, Soldiers must maintain professional conduct and good order and discipline in the virtual world in the same ways they would in the real world. Special care should be taken to ensure that public facing profiles, to include Facebook pages and sites, present an appropriate picture of Army life. Army Regulation 530-1, Operations Security policy, states that Soldiers who blog and identify their affiliation with the Army must let their commander know they're blogging.

Overall the things to remember, the lessons to take forward are 'You, as a Soldier or family member, are not an official spokesperson for the U.S. Army, the President or the State Department.' **CARE MUST BE TAKEN TO PRESENT A PROFESSIONAL, KNOWLEDGEABLE AND ACCURATE PORTRAYAL OF ANY GIVEN SITUATION WITHOUT JEOPARDIZING MISSION READINESS, EFFECTIVENESS OR SECURITY.** Knowing when to ask for help, whether from a public affairs representative or the chain of command can aid each Soldier from 'flying blind.' The expectation of knowing an M-16A2 rifle with no training, guidance or practice would not be recommended on the battlefield and neither is being unprepared for the media that awaits all of us around every corner.

Fires

MEDIA ENGAGEMENT SMART CARD

Things to know and do

- 1) Remember the media is a powerful communication device, which you can use to tell the Army's story and support the overall information strategy. All Soldiers and leaders are potential ambassadors/spokespersons for your country and unit.
- 2) Soldiers do have a right not to talk to the media; however, those who refuse to speak may send a powerful message that something is being hidden or the operation is going badly.
- 3) Media are influential members of the public. They are not the enemy. They are after a story; so, tell your story.
- 4) Do not refuse to talk to unescorted media. During early stages of an operation, media are likely to be uncredentialed and unescorted. In this case, be courteous and as long as it does not interfere with the mission, talk with them.

Prepare for the media

- 1) Never go into a situation blind. Ask a public affairs representative for help and guidance (if you need it). Anticipate issues and questions and develop responses that include relevant command messages. In addition to your unit's role and the Army, consider current issues in the national and international communities. You can affect them all.

Interviews don'ts

- 1) Do not schedule or participate in an interview or an event if it will interfere with your mission. However, do not use the unit's mission or being "too busy" as a "smokescreen" to avoid the media or an interview.
- 2) Do not attempt to cover negative events with a cloak of secrecy. Do, however, talk about matters over which you have direct responsibility.
- 3) Everything is "on the record." Never answer "off the record" questions. Watch out for the "turned off recorder" being on.
- 4) Never lie. Always be careful of personal opinions, which may be viewed as representing your unit or the Army.
- 5) Do not discuss exact numbers, troop strengths or specific vehicle modifications. Use terms like approximate, light, heavy or moderate.
- 6) Do not discuss political or foreign policy matters. Don't be caught speaking for the president or State Department. Stay in your lane and talk about things within your specific areas.
- 7) Do not provide the enemy with propaganda material by grumbling and thoughtlessly complaining.
- 8) Don't get trapped. If a reporter tells you he got information from another unit, refer him to those sources for more details. Use common sense.

Helpful hints

- 1) If you can't talk about something, tell the media why.
- 2) Be careful of statements of absolute nature.
- 3) Know what you can say and how to show the media as well as the things you cannot discuss or show.

Final thoughts

- 1) What you say or don't say can save your buddy's life.
- 2) What may happen in your area of operations can have international implications.
- 3) Remember what you say to the reporter is not as important as what the reporter says to the world.

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